

Women in Arab media: present but not heard

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Introduction

Greater freedom of expression and advance of human rights is affecting all the domains of public life in the Arab world.

Historically, the deficit in women's empowerment has not been simply a problem of justice and equity, but a major cause of the Arab world's backwardness. "The utilization of Arab women's capabilities through political and economic participation remains the lowest in the world in quantitative terms, as evidenced by the very low share of women in parliaments, cabinets, and the work force, and in the trend toward the feminization of unemployment."(UNDP, 2002: 23).

Nowadays, Arab women are turning to media as a means for their empowerment, as a medium for education that overcomes barriers of distance and time, and as a tool to advance their progress and development in their communities.

The new information technologies have allowed women in Arab world to be seen as equal to men in their ability to discuss, investigate, report and present various issues. They facilitated links and networks for women to interact effectively and share information and resources faster. Meanwhile, the women's movements in the region are increasingly using the electronic media to put forward their advocacy and build solidarity.

No doubt, rapid growth of technology enhanced the presence of women in the Arab media; however, the question raised is not whether the increased presence of women in Arab media has led to an increase in the availability and display of information about women before the public opinion. Instead, the question is whether it has contributed to a qualitative change in women's political and social status in the region.

This lecture is going to examine whether Arab women are gaining "role" as they increased their "presence" in Arab media.

I- Dramatic changes shifted Arab media

The emergence of a global telecommunications revolution in the 1980s, particularly in satellite television, brought dramatic changes to the Arab world, perhaps more than to any other region in the Globe.

Witnessing the impact of CNN's international coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, which made it a perfect "television war" (Al-Emad & Fahmy, 2008: 2), several Arab states realized the strategic value of satellite television during times of conflict. Arab governments saw satellite news as the ideal vehicle for extending influence beyond their own borders, so many began launching their own national satellite TV networks, and one of these was the prince of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa who launched Al-Jazeera.

Basically, the creation of Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel in Qatar in 1996 was a qualitative breakthrough in the sphere of new cross-border Arab media. Specialized in news and current affairs 24-hours, Al-Jazeera broke the routine of the satellite channels set up by governments and private Saudi and Lebanese entrepreneurs. It was a real revolution in the Arab world (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003: 7), or as Hugh Miles describes it "A seed planted in the desert" (Miles, 2006: 7). Al Jazeera, whose slogan was "the opinion and the counter-opinion," surprised Arab governments and audiences by broadcasting uninhibited political discussions and debates and breaking many taboos (Rushing, 15).

As for women issues, Al Jazeera's contribution was "towards rectifying the women's empowerment deficit"(Sakr, Zayani (ed.), 2005: 127-150). Also, it broke ground with the launching of a discussion program geared specifically towards women named "For Women Only", where distinguished, educated women from all over the Arab world come to express their points of view regarding critical social, political, scientific and environmental issues. The show was taken off the air without reasonable explanations in June 2005 after it had run for only three years.

Another popular program geared for women was "Every woman" launched on Al Jazeera International, in November 2006. It uncovered the stories that women from different educational and racial backgrounds want to share with viewers

around the world. The show tackles various subjects like religion, society, sex, education and arts, all from women's perspectives, and has been granted a prestigious prize, from the Association of International Broadcastingⁱ.

Nowadays, there are many specialized Arab TV stations for women, but just covering issues of fashion, food, diets etc. and in June 2009, there was a launching for a new Arab women Channel "EVE" on Nile sat, that discusses all topics related to Arab women including their role in politics, society, business besides the traditional topics of fashion, cooking etc.

Before Al Jazeera, It was Lebanon who opened "wide doors" to women in media. Lebanese channels hired females to present morning shows, aerobics, and news. LBC and Future, the two Lebanese satellite channels that started in 1996, "used women anchors in low-cut attire in a bid to woo Gulf audiences, who were unaccustomed to seeing women on their own television screens" (Sakr, 2007: 94)

In his book, Sakr quotes from "Najat sharrafeddine" of future TV that she "remembers a lebanese director telling female presenters that viewers wanted to see them, not listen to them", and adds "Gebran Tueni, once told one of his reporters on an- nahar that TV works according to "Star" system, empowering women through their beauty.(99)

However, the women dilemma of "Beauty before Brains" is not an exclusive matter of Arab media. It is an international phenomenon; "Greta Van Susteren" case is a clear one:

When the well-respected news-show host "Greta Van Susteren" moved from CNN to Fox in early 2002, she did not only had a makeover; she surgically altered her face to appear younger and more "beautiful." When her new show, premiered on the Record, her hair was fashionably cut and she sat behind a table so viewers could see her short skirt and legs.

"Before her surgery, Van Susteren had been an increasingly visible beacon projecting the hope that women had made progress. You believed that she had made it in television because she was so darn smart, clearly the best legal analyst on the air. However, her surgery symbolizes what many analysts have argued for decades: that the way a woman looks is far more important than what she has to say. She has become a painful reminder of women's inequality... Being smart,

smarter, smartest isn't enough" (Armstrong, 2006). By trying to become just another pretty face, Van Susteren instead became another cultural casualty.

Back to Arab media case, it is worth to note that whatever the motives behind Arab women recruitment in TV stations in last two decades, Arab female journalists did prove to be equal to men and sometimes more effective and influential:

In a survey of eight Arab countries in August 2004, viewers of both sexes named Khadija bin Qenna of Al-Jazeera and Muntaha al-Ramhi of Al- Arabiya as being among their five most preferred television anchors (sagr,2007: 95).

Taking the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006 as a case study, Lebanese female journalists faced bombs, bullets and missiles surpassing their male colleagues' coverage. Being first in the scenes, female journalists capitalized on their gender, which afforded them easier access to shelters where mostly women and children huddled to escape Israel's bombing and enabled them to disseminate images of the unfolding human tragedy.

Many examples of brave Arab female journalists can be given. Some of which faced death, danger and assassination:

- a- Liqaa abd Razzak from Asharqiyya Iraqi station was killed in Iraq in October 2004.
- b- May Chidiac of LBC, was a subject of failed assassination through a car bomb in September 2005. She survived losing her leg and arm.
- c- Atwar Bahjat a brave Iraqi journalist was assassinated with two colleagues while covering the bombing of a religious shrine in Iraq in February 2006.
- d- Layal Najib, 23 years old Lebanese photographer, was killed on the spot when an Israeli missile struck next to the taxi in which she was traveling in south Lebanon during Israeli war against Lebanon in July 2006.
- e- Nancy Al Saba ' of "New TV" Lebanese station, seemed to disappear from view one day after Israeli rockets rained down on her location on a building's rooftop in the southern suburb of Beirut in August 2006. But she

was shown days later running from Israeli warplanes flying at low altitude over the same area when she went back to cover the destruction.

- f- Rima Maktabi of “Al Arabiya TV” overcame stereotypes about her earlier career as a TV weather girl and game show host, and embraced the challenge with bravery and determination to accurately disseminate the horrors of the Israeli war against Lebanon 2006.
- g- Najwa Qasim of “Al Arabiya TV” bravely reported the conflict in 2006 even though she was wounded while covering the Allied invasion of Iraq at 2003. She was at Al- Arabiya Baghdad office when it was attacked by a car bomb in October 2004.

However, These Cases cannot be seen in all Arab countries especially in the conservative ones, like Saudi Arabia and Sudan for example:

- On July 3, 2009, Sudan’s Morality police arrested a female journalist “Loubna al-Hussein” for wearing “trousers”. The fact that she was also wearing a headscarf did not spare her. They publicly humiliated, and then arrested her and twelve or thirteen other women journalists, in a restaurant. The police beat them all, then the court sentenced the women to forty lashes in public for the crime of “indecent clothing” as CNN reported.

Al-Hussein lawyer said that “wearing pants” excuse was a veil and the real reason for the trial of al Hussein was her work for the UN mission, and her reports supporting the Sudanese president's “Al bashir” trial before the International Criminal Court, as she declared to “Shorouq” Tunisian newspaper in September 2009.

Another Sudanese female journalist “Amal Habbani” faced charges of "defaming police” when she wrote an article in support of Hussein in “Ajrass Al-Horreya” (freedom bells) Sudanese newspaper in August 2009.

However, if the trial was a punishment for a woman for wearing pants or for practicing her personal freedom, it reveals the continuing discrimination against women and the severe abuse of human rights in Sudan.

Similar and even more abusive cases can be reported in Saudi Arabia:

1. In March 2009, news reported that Saudi clerics called on the government to ban women from appearing on television and to prohibit their images in print media, which they called a sign of growing "deviant thought."

In a letter to the Information Minister Abdul Aziz al-Khoja, 35 Islamic clerics also condemned the increase of music and dancing on television, as well as images of women in popular newspapers and magazines that they labeled "obscene." They said that the ministry had permitted the import of "obscene newspapers and magazines that are filled with deviant thought and pictures of beautiful women on its covers and inside." And stressed, "There should be no Saudi woman on television, in any case" (AFP, 24 March 2009).

2. Not being allowed to drive or attend press conferences are only some of the obstacles that female journalists in Saudi Arabia face on a daily basis. Saudi journalist Amjaad Rida told al-Hayat newspaper, "One day, about ten years ago, I was informed of my promotion to vice editor-in-chief. After receiving the compliments of the colleagues, the news suddenly took another turn. My nomination was frozen, or to use a better term, it evaporated due to the threats of resignation of the male officials at the newspaper if I was to take this position." (Al-Khamri,2008)

In Fact, her story is typical for female journalists in a country where even the women's magazines are run by men.

II- Media stereotyping Arab women

It is important to note that women are shown as sex objects by media all over the world. Actually, negative stereotyping of women and rigid gender roles keep them from entering male-dominated sectors or accessing top managerial positions (Kofi Anan, 2005: 5-12).

Stereotyping Arab women is a reality in both Arab and western media.

A- Western media:

For decades, Western media showed Arab women as either veiled, conservative and dominated by men, or as sex objects, doing pornographic oriental dances to entertain men. The most dominant image prevailing nowadays is that of veiled, homebound, uneducated women who need help to take their first steps toward

emancipation. Those types undoubtedly exist in the Arab world, so do highly educated, emancipated and professional women who are still struggling against restrictive social values.

1- Cinema:

History reveals that since the beginning of cinema, Hollywood's movies have humiliated, demonized, and eroticized Arab women. Obviously, film makers did not create these images but inherited and embellished Europe's pre-existing Arab stereotypes. In the 18th and 19th centuries, European artists and writers offered fictional renditions of women as bathed and submissive exotic "objects". The stereotype came to be accepted as valid, becoming an indelible part of European popular culture (Alloula, 1986; Shaheen, 2001).

Hollywood's Arabia 'is a place where young slave girls lie about on soft couches, stretching their slender legs, ready to do a good turn for any handsome stranger who stumbles into the room...' (Zinsser, 1961).

In his book "Reel Bad Arabs", Shaheen noticed that "In Arabian Nights fantasies such as *The Sheik* (1921), *Slave Girl* (1947), and John Goldfarb, *Please Come Home* (1964), Arab women appear as leering out from diaphanous veils, or as unsatisfied, disposable 'knick-knacks' lounging on ornate cushions, scantily-clad harem maidens with bare midriffs, closeted in the palace's women's quarters and/or on display in slave markets" (Shaheen, 2001:23).

The stream continues in the third millennium. In Disney's remake of "Around the World in Eighty Days" (2004), for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays Prince Hapi, a Mideast sheikh with 'one hundred or so wives.' This means that films continue to show Arab woman as a slave for sex, even though the image of a terrorist dominated after 9/11.

2- Newspapers:

A research paper aimed to analyze U.S. and international newspaper articles on Arab and Muslim women from 9/11/01 up to 9/11/05, with the aim of better understanding how women who wear the veil are represented in western media, found that "there are little time-periods where reporters looked beyond the stereotype and got to know Arab women and allow them to speak...Whether

oppressed, victimized or turned into a superwoman, that woman in the news is more often not caricature of the Arab and Muslim woman in real life. Readers have not yet able to receive a consistent and accurate representation of the diverse personalities, lives and opinions of these women". (Eltantawy, 28-29).

3- TV shows

TV shows influence western people perceptions and attitudes towards various issues. So, most of the misperceptions towards Arab women are caused by the flow of information through TV stations.

For example, on the 28th of September 2009, Oprah Winfrey hosted the "Goodwill Ambassador for the UNICEF"; the famous Lebanese singer "Nancy Ajram" on her TV show on CBS station. In that show, Winfrey referred to Lebanon as being "deeply conservative", presented a documentary showing "Lebanese women veiled similar to the Afghani ones" and contrasted them with Nancy's Ajram style and dance moves.

Oprah's documentary surely misrepresented Lebanese women, who are the most modernized women in the region. Actually, Nancy Ajram style and fashion represent a large segment of Lebanese females. ESCWA Statistics show that 75% of the Lebanese women are unveiled and have freedom of dress; women's enrolment in tertiary education exceeded that of men with 44 per cent compared to 40 per cent of men; (ESCWA, 2004:19).

B- Arab media:

Same misperceptions of women and representing them as sex objects are seen in Arab media for decades. Critics confronted the focus on women's bodies prevalent in the media and called for new images of women as mothers, wives, and active participants in society. Queen Rania of Jordan, who was one of these voices, launched the "Arab women's media campaign" to remind heads of satellite channels and other media leaders that they had a role to play in correcting misconceptions about Arab women and encouraged the efforts for changing current stereotypes affecting them, in a more strategic manner. (Queen Rania official website, 2005)

Arab media responded by developing more positive images of women that reflect daily life through featuring women in the Arab world as submissive wives

“happily” using the products being sold. There was too much focus on housewives and too little attention given to women as workers or political leaders.

Therefore, Arab media focus has turned towards a different, but still stereotyped direction.

1- Cinema and films

The most representative model of women in Arab cinema was found in Egyptian films during Egyptian cinema’s decades of output. Researchers studied the image of women in Egyptian films and found the following results:

1- Films produced between 1962 and 1972 (410 films) showed the following diversity, by percentage:

43.4% no given profession

20% housewives, wives, divorcees, widows

20.5% working women

10.5% students

9.5% artists

The most significant, and by far the highest, percentage is that of women without any profession, i.e. women who are simply females.

In fact, the woman as just a female account for more than 80 per cent of women’s roles in commercial Arab films, and this portrayal has had the greatest influence on the public.

In such films, the woman is a cunning devil who seeks nothing but pleasure, marital or extramarital. All she wants is to catch a man, any man, since this is every woman’s highest goal. (UNDP, 2005: 157)

2- Another research for the same UNDP report studied 31 films produced between 1990 and 2000 and recorded the following:

- An exaggerated representation of the violence perpetrated by, and against, women;

Some of the movies and films in this period of time which portrayed women in scenes of sex and violence carried strong hatred for women, and had titles such as: “A Dangerous Woman”, “The Devil is a Woman”, “The Curse of a Woman”, “Torture is a Woman” etc.

- The political roles featured in the sample turn out to be largely superficial and unconvincing and have little to do with women’s actual roles in life; they almost represent political women as an absolute dictator.
- During the 1990s, the films neglected the problems facing peasant and working women, concentrating only on modern urban women without, however, reflecting the various dimensions of their personality as human beings;
- Women's social, political and cultural roles were conspicuously absent from the films, indicating that Arab cinema shows no concern for the evolution of women’s position in Arab societies (UNDP, 2005:157).

3- The UNDP report discusses also the impact of three movies after 2004:

- a- At the second half of 2004, a storm broke upon Egyptian film-making and the Arab world after the Egyptian film, “Bahibb is-Sima” (“I Love the Cinema”), directed by Usama Fawzi, and caused a public outcry. The film presents the character of a Coptic woman who suffers from sexual deprivation because of her husband’s religious extremism and enters into a sexual relationship with another man.

The censors first refused to let the film be released, then allowed it after cutting some scenes, and then reduced some of the cuts. Nevertheless, private individuals and institutions took the film to court and asked for it to be banned. More significantly, both Al- Azhar and the Coptic Church made common cause against the film (UNDP, 2005:158).

- b- A second major outcry occurred in 2005 and concerned the Egyptian film, “Al-Bahithat ‘an Al-Hurriyya” (“Women Searching for Freedom”), directed by Inas Al-Dighaydi. The film deals with the problems of three women from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco living in Paris and searching for the freedom that they had lost in their own countries. Scores of articles were written against the film, which was

dubbed “Women in Search of Sex”. Posters were vandalized and there was a general call for people not to see the film. The director was subjected to numerous false accusations and received several death threats. (158)

- c- In Syria, Muhammad Malas directed the film “Bab Al-Maqam” about a true incident that took place in Aleppo at the beginning of the new millennium when a young Syrian killed his sister because she loved to sing the songs of Umm Kulthum at home. According to her father, if she loved those songs, she must have been in love, and if she was in love, “she had committed a shameful act”.

The report concludes that “Arab cinema plays a dual role stemming from its commercial nature. On the one hand, using the power of moving images to purvey stereotypes, it generalizes values of sexual discrimination. At the same time, particularly with the new cinema emerging in more than one Arab country, it sends progressive messages that reflect the wishes of new generations of women seeking freedom and self-assertion in order to realize their full human potential without being diminished or demeaned” (UNDP, 2005:158).

6- Talk shows and News

Although there has been a steady increase in the number of women professionals over the past 20 years in the Arab world, most mainstream press coverage continues to rely on men as experts in the fields of business, politics and economics, sports etc. Arab women in the news are more likely to be featured as victims in stories about accidents, natural disasters, or domestic violence than in stories about their professional abilities or expertise.

Arab women can be seen in the news and political talk shows as presenters or anchors but rarely as political leaders or experts, however, this inadequate women’s coverage seems to be a global phenomenon.

Based on information collected from monitoring news in 70 countries in different regions of the world, an international report entitled “who makes the news?” notes that “In stories on politics and government only 14% of news subjects are women; and in economic and business news only 20%. Even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it is the male voice (64% of

news subjects) that prevails, while Women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims”. That report adds that “Women make the news not as figures of authority, but as celebrities (42%), royalty (33%) or as 'ordinary people'... Female newsmakers outnumber males in only two occupational categories - homemaker (75%) and student (51 %)... Only 21 % of news subjects – the people who are interviewed, or whom the news is about – are females”. (GMMP, 2005:30-32)

Egypt was one of the Arab countries to join the report. The result of monitoring Egyptian news on the specific monitoring date 16 Feb. 2005 was as follows: “Not counting reporters and presenters, 40 women appeared in the news in all Egyptian media compared with 260 men”. The Egyptian researcher commented afterwards, “It is strange- to put it mildly- that half of the population is almost completely ignored” (GMMP, 2005:80).

The report found that even in talk shows and professional reports, “Expert opinion in the news is overwhelmingly male. Men are 83% of experts, and 86% of spokespersons. By contrast, women appear in a personal capacity - as eye witnesses (30%), giving personal views (31 %) or as representatives of popular opinion (34%)”. The report concludes that “The world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible”. (GMMP, 2005:16)

The White House Project, also, achieved three researches to find out the presence of women on Sunday morning talk shows on the five major networks: ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX and NBC:

- The first “Who’s Talking” report found that men outnumbered women 9 to 1 on these agenda-setting shows. (White House Project, 2001:13).
- The follow-up report found that there was little improvement—women only made up 13% of all guest appearances on the shows, and the vast majority of guests are still white and male. (White House Project, 2002:1).
- In the 2005 study, called “Who's Talking Now” found more than half of Sunday morning news shows did NOT include a single women. (White House Project, 2005:7).

Therefore, we can conclude that the absence of women in news and talk shows is an international trend.

- Women in Sports shows

Arab women athletes are also given short shrift in media. As it has been known that sports is a restricted domain for women in Saudi Arabia, and it is not easy for Arab females to be athletes in the conservative Arab societies where sports is regarded "a shameful profession" for ladies.

When Arab women first entered the traditionally male domain of sports, they faced a disparaging public. The widespread perception was that sports were a thing reserved for men. This, along with dress codes that contradict cultural norms and religious beliefs, created paralyzing obstacles for Arab women trying to break into the world of sports.

Al Jazeera's English covered Arab women athletes training for the 2008 Olympics. Moroccan runner, Palestinian boxers, a Qatar race-car driver, and Egyptian soccer players were shown. Among other topics, the show addressed opposition the women have faced being female in sports, especially concerning their clothing.

Even in the more modernized Arab countries, Arab women athletes still lack promotion and presence in Arab media. This is also recorded as an international phenomenon:

A report aimed to study sports coverage on three network affiliates in Los Angeles, concluded that "only 9 per cent of airtime was devoted to women's sports, in contrast to the 88 per cent devoted to male athletes. Female athletes fared even worse on ESPN's national sports show Sports Center, where they occupied just over 2 per cent of airtime". (Duncan and Messner, Media awareness)

Duncan notes that commentators (97 per cent of whom are men) use different language when they talk about female athletes. Where men are described as "big," "strong," "brilliant," "gutsy" and "aggressive," women are more often referred to as "weary," "fatigued," "frustrated," "panicked," "vulnerable" and "choking." Commentators are also twice as likely to call men by their last names only, and three times as likely to call women by their first names only. Duncan

argues that this "reduces female athletes to the role of children, while giving adult status to white male athletes."

- **Arab women in Ads**

As many other issues, the representation of Arab women in advertisements was a mirror of the diverse cultural currents in the Arab region.

Advertisements shown in Saudi Arabia must show veiled women. Ads aiming for the Kuwaiti, Dubai and other Gulf markets, on the other hand, try to mix things up a bit, often going for the stylish, attractive, but conservative style that is increasingly becoming a trend among elites in the region.

For advertisements intended for the Gulf, women can be dressed casually and unveiled, but then men won't be shown in the same scene of the storyboard. As for the Middle East, more modern and liberal women are shown. In Lebanon, "sexy, erotic" figures are shown in most of the ads.

In Egypt, Even though an estimated 80 percent of Egyptian women wear a veil in public today, it's still rare to see a veiled woman in an ad specifically targeting the Egyptian market. However, it's a different story on the Nile Sat nowadays.

Here come some examples from MBC4 station, which is owned by Saudi businessman and aired specifically for American programs on NileSat:

- i. During summer 2006, one KFC ad shows a group of beautiful young women at home, enjoying their fried chicken while having a girls' night, then jumps to a separate scene of young guys eating their chicken on cushions, and then going outside to leap in a sports car.
- ii. During spring 2007, Arabic-language ad spotlights a beautiful veiled young mother dressed all in white, serving soup (Knorr) to her family in perfect domestic bliss. In a second ad, a gorgeous model in a sexy sundress throws back a 7up while sunbathing on the concrete bank of a public fountain.

- **Women discussing taboos:**

Satellite broadcasting has provided an excellent opportunity for Arab women to access information and knowledge through the different satellite services. Women access to national and international channels, make them more able to

discuss topics that were previously considered taboos, but surely, not in all Arab countries.

In this aspect, we can mention two different cases:

- 1- In October 2009, two female journalists in Saudi Arabia have been sentenced to 60 lashes over the participation in producing a TV show called “Bold Red Line”. It caused a huge scandal in Saudi Arabia when a Saudi man described his extra-marital sex life and talked about how he picked up Saudi women for sex.

In that program, which was aired in July 2009 on the Lebanese LBC satellite channel, Mazen Abdul-Jawad appeared to describe an active sex life and showed sex toys that were blurred by the station. The court sentenced Abdul-Jawad to five years in jail and 1,000 lashes; and LBC offices in Saudi Arabia were closed. (AFP, 24 Oct. 2009)

Actually, the case scandalized the ultraconservative country where such public talk about sex is taboo and the sexes are strictly separated.

- 2- Another case is that of the popular Egyptian show named “Kalaam Kibeer” (big talk). Since 2006, every Saturday night at 11:30 on the Egyptian satellite channel El Mehwar, a veiled lady, Dr. Hoda Kotb, provides sex show education for different age groups: teenagers, couples on the verge of getting married, those already married who have sex problems, and those merely looking to boost their sex life, etc.

Kotb bravely talks about sex, in conservative and even primitive society that still adapt female circumcision till now.

There are good reasons to believe, that satellite channels may be the best venue for cultural changes in Arab World today. Whilst the multiplicity of channels offered by satellite does not guarantee the growth of liberal discourse in Arab society at large, it increases the space for programs tackling taboo subjects which viewers can seek out independently.

In addition, the participatory nature of many satellites’ programs—the emphasis on viewer forums and live call-in components—encourages viewers to exercise their right to self-expression. Moreover, the rapid improvements in production

quality, content and freedom in Arab satellite programming over the past few years has endowed taboo-tackling television with a credibility and authority which was previously unattainable.

III- Social structures

Patriarchal relationships dominate Arab societies in general, even though differences among these societies exist.

Structures of patriarchy were not uniform across the region before colonialism (Sakr, 2002). Yet the Western model of the nation-state, complete with its gendered concepts of citizenship, became the compulsory model for Middle Eastern states emerging from colonialism, where it was imposed on already gendered systems of social stratification. The resulting "intersection" of patriarchies created a historically specific momentum of increasing control exercised over women by men, families, communities, and the state. (Sakr, 2004:7)

So far, Arab women are still victims of societal discrimination by all means - not only victims of male domination. Nowhere in the Arab world do women enjoy equal rights and freedoms, let alone equal opportunities with men.

Family continues to be the first social institution that reproduces patriarchal relationships, values and pressures through gender discrimination. Such pressures on women increase in violence at times of crisis when a woman becomes subject to surveillance. The man's right of disposal over her body, his watch over it, his use of it, his concealment, denial and punishment of it all become more blatant. This violence in turn comes into play to intensify the feminization of poverty, political misery, dependency, domination and alienation (UNDP, 2005:15).

Arab societies and communities begin their discrimination against women since childhood, through drawing different roles and practices for male and female kids. This continues at homes, schools, universities, and doesn't end in the job opportunities.

Different scales of discrimination against women fill Arab daily lives:

- 2- In Gulf countries, it is not women but their male guardians, who have the authority to decide issues such as whether they may work, travel, or whom

they may marry. However, this case is found but rarely in other countries like Lebanon, Tunisia, and Syria etc.

- 3- Access to education remains a serious problem for women in some Arab countries, but in others, women are already better educated than men, however their real problem is the absence of opportunities to use their education and knowledge once they graduate.
- 4- Literacy among women in Arab states has remained exceptionally low. Although the start of the twenty-first century found higher literacy among adult women than men in the Gulf emirates of Qatar and the UAE, elsewhere in the region this ratio was reversed, with female illiteracy reaching 76 percent in Yemen, 65 percent in Morocco, 57 percent in Egypt, 44 percent in Algeria, and 34 percent in Saudi Arabia (UNDP, 2001: 210).

Thus, discrimination against women varies considerably from country to country. This is true also in cases of political and civil rights, family laws, and access to education and jobs, or more generally, in the restrictions imposed on women by traditional social customs. Social classes, also, create additional discrimination against women in some Arab countries.

Of the sixteen countries located in the Middle East and North Africaⁱⁱ, ten have signed, and nine have ratified, the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Even in these countries, discrimination still exists and women's political, educational, and especially personal rights vary greatly. (UNDP, 2002: table 31).

As for the female Journalists, discrimination is obvious in many Arab countries especially Saudi Arabia. Sabria Jawhar, for example, was the editor-in-chief of the daily Saudi Gazette. Jawhar reported telling her story, "I was on my way to attend a press conference when a guard refused to let me in because I'm a woman. So I said that I wasn't a woman but a journalist coming to officially represent the newspaper. But he insisted and kept repeating, 'We don't allow women in'" (MENASSAT, 2008).

Female journalists in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive a car; even if their job requires them to do a lot of field work. They are still compelled to write under a pseudonym, or to use only their first name and the name of their father rather than the family name, in order to avoid harassment from people who still

consider it a great shame for a woman's name to appear in print. Most female journalists have no diploma in journalism because none of the universities for women had a media studies program, as this was considered an inappropriate field for women.

Similarities in the Arab laws affecting women mean that programs about such laws in Arab media must not be seen as specific to a particular locality, but should be raised as social phenomena needed to be amended. For instance, local laws on divorce, rape, honor crimes, or mother's right to pass her nationality to her children resonate across the region, and there are no much differences between Arab states in these aspects.

Women in some Arab countries started to challenge traditional structures. The 16-day campaign in 1998 held to encourage the Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Yemeni media to break long-standing taboos on reporting about violence against women is a good example. The campaign built on reports achieved by an investigative reporter for the 'Jordanian Times' "Rana Hussein" who was the first to expose the phenomenon of so-called honor- crimesⁱⁱⁱ.

Hussein's coverage of this form of family violence provided evidence for a petition aimed at changing the Jordanian law that promises leniency for male perpetrators of such crimes. Parliament rejected the change in November 1999 but at least, the issue of honor killing had been brought into public view (Hussein, 2009).

Actually, Women in the Arab region experience what is called a "double jeopardy". They are not only subject to the widespread restrictions on civic and political participation affecting both sexes, but are further denied autonomy by the discriminatory "personal status laws" based on Islamic "shari'aa" in most of Arab countries.

Whereas men in most Arab countries are not required to give a reason if they divorce their wives, women have to petition for divorce and take their cases to courts to prove "just cause," such as physical or psychological abuse.

Here comes an example that shows that Arab media, in some cases, had been more patriarchal than traditional communities:

Egyptian parliament approved a change in the “law of divorce” in January 2000. Under the new arrangements, a woman can divorce her husband unilaterally and without delay, on condition she return her dowry and surrender all financial rights, regardless of the length of her marriage and the reason for her decision to end it.

Despite the wide presence of women in the Egyptian media, this amendment of the divorce law was not presented as a step for freeing women from injustice and oppression, however as a battle won by women:

- Newspaper cartoons showed men in chains or pushing baby buggies alongside mustached women.
- The pro-government newspaper Al-Usbo'(the week) carried a headline declaring: "Men's era is over".
- Al-Wafd, published by the leading opposition party, said of the law: "No one has a good word to say about it."

IV- Political Rights

Although women have made large strides professionally over the last century, politics remains a man’s world. Significant barriers stand in the way of more women assuming positions of political leadership—not least women’s own attitudes (Hunt, 2007).

In most Arab countries, political rights of all their citizens, men and women, are severely curtailed. Even when recognized in laws, they are rarely respected in practice. Stereotypes, political party gatekeepers, the roles that societies expect women to conform to, and the lack of resources are some of the obstacles preventing women from running for high-level policymaking offices in Arab world.

Only two Arab countries do not recognize the right of women to vote and to stand for elections. These two, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), do not hold elections in the first place; and Kuwait was the only country that holds regular elections but excluded women until recently in 2006.

Some Middle Eastern states recognized the political rights of women relatively early—Syria in 1949, Lebanon in 1952, Egypt in 1956, and Tunisia in 1957etc.

however, in a cultural and social environment inimical to women's acquisition and free exercise of their political rights, it takes more than legal edicts to make gender equality in political participation a reality.

In fact, No comprehensive data are available about whether Arab women vote autonomously rather than following the directions of the leader man in the family.

It was a paradox in Kuwaiti parliamentary elections 2006, for example, whereas Kuwaiti women, who were the first time to vote after decades of Marginalization, elected the Islamic fundamentalists who denied their right to vote. None of the 54 women who stood for election in Kuwait in 2006 and 2008 made it. In 2009, only 4 won out of the 16 women candidates who ran and in two out of five electoral constituencies, women candidates came on top of the polls.

Women constitute over 54% of eligible voters in Kuwait, yet they accounted for only 35% of those who voted in 2006 - the first elections that women could participate in. A recent study has also shown that in the 2008 elections only 3% of women voters cast their votes for women candidates. (UNDP news, 31May 2009)

So, it has been found that few women stand for office in Arab world even when they are allowed to do so by law and fewer are appointed to ministerial positions. The presence of women in parliaments and ministerial positions ranges from none in most Arab countries to a maximum of about 12 percent in rare cases.

As for Lebanon, referred as the most democratic state in the region, the parliamentary elections held in June 2009 revealed a significant decline in the role of women both in terms of the number of candidates and in terms of electoral victories, in contrast to a remarkable female voter turnout witnessed in most Lebanese regions.

Evaluating the election results, note the following trends:

1 – The number of female MPs decreased by 35 percent in Parliament compared to the year 2005, and the number of female parliamentarians was reduced to four out of 128, which is far fewer than politically restricted neighbors such as Syria, which had 30 women MPs out of 250; Jordan which had 13 out of 165; and Egypt which had 31 out of 718.

It is important to note that the ascension of these four female parliamentarians was tied to their political heritages and the influence of their slain relatives not to their own capacities.

2 – The level of women’s participation as candidates in the parliamentary elections dropped from 34 women in the 2000 elections to just 14 women in the 2005 rounds, i.e. to just 3.5 percent of the number of candidates, ending up at 12 women in the 2009 parliamentary elections, less than two percent of candidates.

3 – On contrary, Women’s voter turnout exceeded that of men. A comparison of voter turnout in the rounds that saw a heated and extremely politicized electoral battle indicates that Lebanese women are no less politically active or enthusiastic than men (Rahbani, 2009).

Some other Arab governments, influenced by United States’ recommendations, have made an effort to appoint more women to national legislatures and high-level government positions. Countries such as Egypt, Jordan, or Morocco, for example, which have proven adept at maintaining a balance between authoritarianism and limited democratic freedoms, did some minor changes in the position of women without much difficulty.

Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are moving hesitantly in that direction, with the governments apparently in full control of the pace of change. Saudi Arabia has been very wary of embarking on any type of reform, social or political.

Hence, Governing remains an overwhelmingly male prerogative in Arab countries, but it is worth to note that this is true all around the world, except in some Scandinavian countries. Formal equality of rights does not translate easily into equal political roles for men and women even in the countries where women are most emancipated. (Tinker, 2004: 5).

Today there are more women in government than ever before, but the global average of women in assemblies in 2008 was 18.4%. Yet even at the current rate of increase, developing countries will not reach the ‘parity zone’ where neither sex holds more than 60% of seats until 2045.(UNIFEM,2008:17)

To what extent did media help empowering Arab women in political issues?

To answer this question, we shall give Lebanon as an example, because Lebanon is regarded as the most liberal and democratic country in the region:

Lebanon's election campaign 2009 was full of women — except where it counts i.e. in candidates' lists. The ad campaigns of both the opposition and the pro-government blocs tried to draw women to the ballot box:

During May 2009, the Free Patriotic Movement which is a party in the opposition in Lebanon tried to win women's votes through ads campaign where a seductive woman looks out from the billboards that line Beirut's highways proclaiming "Be Beautiful and Vote". This prompted the pro-government blocs to respond with their own ad campaign that stated "Be Equal and Vote!" though featuring, of course, an equally sexy model. These campaigns led a lingerie brand to jump in with its own mock election ad: a woman in silky underwear urging, "Vote for me."

The electoral campaigns called on women to vote, but they were not embarrassed in the dismal number of female candidates on their party lists.

One of the four female winners was the journalist "Nayla Tueni". However, she didn't ascend to the parliament for her media achievements at all, however, she seek the seat of her father, Gibran, who was assassinated in 2005 by a car bombing. "The majority of the elected women started their political life after a tragic incident — the murder of a husband, father or brother. This is our situation and we do not deny it," the journalist Tueni declared bluntly.

Conclusion

New technologies, especially media technology, can equally be used to do the same things in the same way, perpetuating the inequality, squelching diversity or fostering exclusivity.

The advances made in information technology have benefits as well as disadvantages for women. Indeed, new technologies may throw up social boundaries linked to gender, but there is another possibility that housework technologies might increase women's isolation in their homes. The deployment of new media, in other words, involves both opportunities and challenges.

Actually, increased numbers of women working in the communications sector has not translated into increased access to power and decision-making in media organizations; women have not been able to influence media policies.

Although the number of Arab female journalists increased simultaneously, there is still lack of gender sensitivity in media policies and programs; instead there is increased promotion of consumerism. Women's presence behind the screen didn't sum up in more stories being handled from female perspective. Female journalists and producers resisted being assigned to such stories for fear of being "typecast".

Meanwhile, the number of women working in the media is not an indication of their influence over content. Women continue to be portrayed in a stereotyped manner by the media; and there is an increase in violent and pornographic images of women.

Arab media hired more female reporters, announcers, presenters, technicians, and production assistants but no female high executives; this means that women may have "presence," but not a "role".

Editorially, Arab women journalists are not as empowered as their numbers would suggest. Decision-making is primarily in male hands, swayed by local, regional and international political and economic currents, given the country's geographic position.

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ⁱ Association for international broadcasting, It offers “AIB International Media Excellence Awards” for the best talent, the best programming and the most innovative technology across television, radio, online and mobile. <http://www.aib.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱ These are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Honor crimes involve the murder or attempted murder of women alleged to have besmirched their family's reputation by being found in the company of an unrelated male.